

Assemblies of God turns 100, and looks to a multiethnic future

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August 6, 2014

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(RNS) The Rev. Paul Agamiri made a vow when he was housed at a Kenyan refugee camp in the 1990s: If he ever made it to the United States, he would work with white pastors in America.

A decade after he arrived in Fargo, North Dakota, the Sudanese man started All Nations Assembly of God in 2005 with Sudanese and Liberian refugees. It now includes Africans from a dozen nations and three deacons—a Liberian, a Hutu, and a Tutsi. Though just a few white worshippers join the 250 each Sunday for standing-room-only worship, Agamiri wants them to feel included.

“Many of the white people, they’re afraid to come, thinking that they would not be accepted,” Agamiri said. “White or black or whatever color, we are all connected together. We are God’s children, so there’s no worry.”

Agamiri’s church—with its swaying youth choir singing in Swahili—is the epitome of the Assemblies of God, which is marking its 100th anniversary this week from its home base in Springfield, Missouri, and is the world’s largest Pentecostal denomination.

The centennial events include a summit on church planting—the process that gave birth to Agamiri’s church, which was sponsored by a parent church that has also spawned a Nepali/Bhutanese congregation. AG members from more than 100 countries will attend the celebration of the “fellowship” that has grown from 300 people gathered in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in April 1914 to 67.5 million adherents worldwide.

The U.S. denomination alone is a veritable United Nations of some 3.1 million faithful—with a membership that is 41 percent nonwhite, up from 31 percent a decade ago.

General Superintendent George Wood said the denomination has grown because its members model the methods of the earliest followers of Jesus.

“They were tasked with taking the gospel to every nation,” said Wood, 72, who also heads the World Assemblies of God Fellowship. “The word *nation* in the Greek language is *ethnos*, or ethnic group. Our task, right from day one, has been to attempt to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the ethnic groups of this world and in this country.”

Wood and others acknowledge that the Assemblies’ racial history has not been unblemished. With roots in the interracial Azusa Street Revival that began in Los Angeles in 1906, the leaders of the Assemblies of God started out as a group of white men. Bishop Charles H. Mason of the Church of God in Christ, which would eventually become one of the largest black Pentecostal denominations, attended the Hot Springs gathering, but black and white leaders ended up leading segregated groups.

“We did have a slow start,” Wood said. “In the last number of decades, we’ve seen tremendous progress in the United States.”

He attributes the racial separation of the early years to leaders’ following the segregationist culture at the time rather than scriptural ideals.

“However, the Holy Spirit is a great corrector of behavior, and over a course of time, people more and more realized that this segregation and division among races was not ever God’s plan,” Wood said. “And so I think now, as we look over 100 years, the majority of our history has been one of inclusion rather than exclusion.”

Despite the advances in race relations, the multiethnic dynamic only goes so far.

Michael Emerson, a Rice University sociologist who studies race and religion, said the Assemblies are “more diverse than most other denominations,” but that diversity doesn’t always trickle down to individual congregations.

“Forty percent of their membership is nonwhite,” he said, “but nowhere near 40 percent of their congregations are multiracial.”

Beyond building the range of ethnic congregations, the U.S. denomination has worked to foster better relations with predominantly black groups from which it had been estranged. Last November, AG leaders invited their counterparts from the

Church of God in Christ to Springfield. COGIC leaders, in turn, have invited Wood to speak at a September celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Bishop Charles H. Mason, COGIC's founder.

Since reaching agreement in February with the smaller, predominantly black United Pentecostal Council of the Assemblies of God, leaders of the two fellowships have begun to meet.

The Rev. Thomas Barclay, international presiding elder of the UPCAG, who is based in Chicago, said he attended the AG's Illinois District meeting and received a standing ovation and apologies for the past.

Grant Wacker, Duke Divinity School professor of Christian history, said the Assemblies are simultaneously increasing their outreach to Hispanics and Native Americans and retaining their strong conservative political and theological values.

"There are more and more minority worshippers who take the Assemblies of God absolutely seriously in their claim that the Holy Spirit is blind to gender and ethnic differences," Wacker said.

Additionally, the AG's long-term emphasis on sending missionaries overseas is now working in reverse, with immigrants like Agamiri coming to the U.S. to win souls.

"They're not just here as a refuge, as a place to land," said Pastor Shawn Stoll, a white assistant pastor at Agamiri's church, "but they are here in a missionary form, to reach out to the Americans and to the Africans as well."